

The background of the entire image is a repeating pattern of a woman's face, Maria Svartholm, smiling. Overlaid on this is a large, stylized graphic of a flower or sunburst in shades of purple and blue. The text is centered over this graphic.

radical democracy

interview:

maria svalt

**national director,
democratic socialists of america**

David Olson interviews Maria Svart

Maria Svart is National Director for Democratic Socialists of America. Previously, she has worked as an organizer for Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group [MPIRG] and the Service Employees International Union [SEIU].

We spoke in May, 2016, just before the first People's Summit in Chicago that June, and two months before the Democratic National Convention. This interview originally appeared on Medium.com.

Radical Democracy: The Bernie Sanders campaign introduced a lot of people to the term “democratic socialism.” What it is, exactly, and what is the DSA?

Maria Svart: For us, democratic socialism is based on the idea that many things make our country strong: freedom of speech, resilient communities, the People. But it's being undermined because a few greedy people use rhetoric to divide us and make deliberate policy choices to enrich themselves and cut programs that families need to survive. They essentially rig the economy to their benefit.

What we want is a society that is run democratically. That includes a more democratic political system than we have now, a democratic economy and culture, and democratic, social institutions. We want people to have a voice in the institutions that affect their lives — the workplace, public programs, all the institutions that impact us.

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We essentially believe that both the economy and society should be run democratically to meet human needs, rather than just making profits for a few people. We are a member-funded and member-run activist organization, not a political party.

DSA runs grassroots, campus, high school, and community-based campaigns through volunteered chapters. We use anything from legislative to direct action and educational work to fight for reforms that empower working people and, over time, push a deeply radical agenda to fully democratize our country. That's what we do, and who we are as an organization.

RD: “A deeply radical agenda.” I like the sound of that. Can you elaborate on that a bit?

MS: Our conception of freedom is that the potential for what you can do with your life doesn't depend on the accident of your birth. Nobody should be born in poverty, or have education be completely out of reach. Everyone should have adequate housing and high quality healthcare.

We believe that we have to radically restructure our economy to enable that, because **right now you have essentially only the one percent influencing the political process.** We have a "one dollar, one vote" process, not a "one person, one

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vote" process. We have to change that, and you also need to change the way institutions are run.

Right now in most workplaces there is a boss and a lot of workers. The workers have to sell their labor, they are paid a wage, and they produce something, whether it's a service or a good — and they don't get the full value of whatever they produce. Their boss decides how much to pay them. And, undemocratically, their boss gets to control all the rest of the profits.

Our alternative vision is that people create things in workplaces, we create things in society, and we should have a choice in the allocation of the wealth that we've produced.

But **what we have under capitalism is a system where a few unaccountable people make these decisions for the rest of us, and we are left competing with each other for the crumbs.**

RD: Sounds great – a radically democratic agenda for the economy and the political arena. How is DSA moving forward on this?

MS: We have a multi-prong strategy. It's going to be a long fight to reach our vision of an alternative society — we don't think we can get it overnight. There needs to be a cultural change that happens democratically, and that takes time. On the other hand, we are on the edge of a climate crisis. The planet could go off a cliff if the profit motive is allowed to continue dictating how the economy is run. So there's a real sense of urgency.

The strategy for our long-term vision is to build a mass movement — grassroots, democratic — of people that have a stake in this. Basically the ninety-nine percent. To have the majority of people on our side, we need to do several things.

First, educate the public — and I give Bernie Sanders as an example of how important that is. He made a choice to run for office, and transformed the political possibilities by simply saying, “This is a democratic socialist vision, and it's possible, it's feasible.” And this vision is something that many, many people in the United States want. They didn't have the words to articulate it, and he provided them. Saying that democratic socialism is not only possible but also desirable is a huge change. And I love that he called it the political revolution.

RD: And millennials were never exposed to anti-communist and socialist propaganda, aren't afraid of words like “socialism and “revolution.”

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MS: He undermines a weapon the power elite has used throughout history, "red-baiting" — the idea that anything that reins in corporate power is socialist, or communist, and is scary and evil. During the Cold War that was an understandable reaction but, today, as people's living standards are going down dramatically, and as young people see no future for themselves and their families, people are beginning to question that. Bernie Sanders has been saying this is actually a democratic vision — that if we tax the one percent, rein in corporate power, and rearrange our political priorities, it's possible. That really feels transformative to me. He is striking at the heart of the capitalist myth that the society we have now is not only the best, but it's the only option. He's really undermining that idea, and we've been doing a lot of work to support that.

RD: So, education about alternative politics and economics is part of the strategy. What else?

MS: **Another part of our strategy is direct action.** We believe it's the only thing that gets anything done — to demand change and create the conditions where decision makers ultimately decide that doing the right thing is less work than doing the wrong thing. We use it as a tactic in a lot of campaigns.

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Another thing we do is legislative. Some organizations only want to be in the streets. Some only want to engage with the formal political system. We think that you can't be only one or the other effectively, you need to do both. So, sometimes we endorse candidates — Bernie Sanders, our members running for office. We work on issue campaigns. We do a sort of street-level struggle, educating and organizing people to pressure decision makers in the political system.

RD: What sort of issues and campaigns are you working on right now?

MS: We work on "non-reformist reforms" — transformative issues that will shift power relationships concretely, and empower working class people — and we define working class quite broadly because most Americans work for a wage or a salary today. So, issues that empower working people at the expense of the ruling class, the capitalist class, and position us one step closer to this **alternative radical vision**. We have a shared economic interest, and a shared interest in our shared humanity. We try to pick campaigns that are multiracial and multifaceted, to knit together all these people. We don't believe that racism and sexism and homophobia will be resolved if we just address economic justice. We believe they're all distinct, but they need to be addressed together as we move forward, as a movement.

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For example, there's a huge strike of Verizon workers in the northeast —almost forty thousand workers are out on strike to preserve jobs from being off-shored and to preserve working conditions. We believe working people should have unions — it's a first step in democratizing a workplace. We have chapters across the country organizing at Verizon Wireless stores to urge customers not to patronize union-busting companies. So, this is a way to demonstrate working-class solidarity.

RD: Are campaigns and direct actions like this directed top-down, from the national organization, or is it locally driven, or both?

MS: Different DSA chapters assess the community they live in: what are the power dynamics, who is not empowered enough, what are the divisions between direct-action people and electoral people, between different ethnic and racial communities? How do we build a stronger movement, how do we concretely build power in the community, and what kind of campaign is not being addressed, or would help us build those kinds of ties?

So, those are the sort of things that we do. We are a very democratic, bottom-up organization. We don't have a party line. We have transparent decision-making. Any chapter can work on national campaigns, but they also choose what's most appropriate for their community, what interests them most.

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RD: We were talking earlier about Bernie Sanders, who famously calls himself a democratic socialist. What is the connection between him, or his campaign, and the DSA?

MS: For Bernie Sanders, we ran what's called an "independent expenditure campaign," rather than a "coordinated campaign" — technical terms to say we did not take part in his official campaign at all. We ran a totally independent campaign, talking about democratic socialism and organizing people at the grassroots level to support him. Bernie Sanders is not a member of DSA, and he hasn't ever been, I don't believe. But we have supported him very strongly in the past. We have a PAC that bundled a lot of grassroots contributions for him when he was running for Senate. He's spoken at our annual conventions many times, and we have a very friendly relationship with him. But he's not a figurehead, not one of our honorary chairs, like Cornel West or Barbara Ehrenreich. He is truly independent.

RD: One of the objectives of Radical Democracy is to help inform and connect what we call the growing "movement of movements" on the Left. Is this sort of intra-organizational movement part of the DSA plan? Or are you more focused on growing your own organization?

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MS: Our vision for building a "movement of movements" — and that's a great phrase, by the way — is really the idea that the majority of people are not engaged with any organization or political movement. **To build a movement powerful enough to take on this really strong ruling class we need to engage all the people, and get as many as possible organized.**

Frances Fox Piven, a sociologist affiliated with DSA, has done a lot of work on how social Movements cannot really be created by organizations. They often are created by the conditions that exist in the world. Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter — those came out of uprisings that captured the popular imagination, and quickly attracted activists who realized what sort of a moment they were in.

DSA certainly would like to grow significantly, but we think it's important to have a relatively decentralized Movement. It's true there's a certain level of coordination, but tremendous creativity and vitality comes from being decentralized. We've certainly seen organizations that develop and grow, then have a hard time evolving. We think a healthy mix of organizations with historic roots and new organizations with new ideas and a more nimble ability to respond is important.

It's critical that we coordinate with each other, be democratic with each other, learn from each other, and ultimately provide opportunities for ordinary people to fight for themselves and for their community. It's a role of organizations to help create conditions — not just where we can effectively win some battle — but where that battle is won by ordinary people coming together, recognizing their shared interests. Maybe the differences are uneasy, but they overcome that and they're able to engage together in a fight. The sense of empowerment and the sense of trust that comes from doing that are really important.

We would certainly love to grow dramatically, would love to have a lot more organizations involved in coalitions with us. And most important, develop ways for the maximum number of people to engage in this fight.

RD: What's DSA's involvement in the People's Summit?

MS: The People's Summit is very exciting. It's coming up in Chicago, and we are one of the handful of organizations helping plan it. Bernie talks about needing a mass movement of politically aware and organized people to make real change, that the political revolution cannot stop at the Democratic National Convention. It can't stop at the general election in November. It's going to be a long-term strategy, and we need to maintain momentum. So, the People's Summit is a gathering — National Nurses Union,

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Progressive Democrats of America, Peoples Action and The People for Bernie Sanders. A lot of really great organizations are coming together. We're hoping to talk about the political moment, provide educational sessions, and get people to talk to each other, regionally, about concrete next steps — what exactly are we going to do to maintain the momentum after the campaign, however it may end? How do we keep moving forward?

It's really a way for people to democratically come together and talk about what it should look like when we keep fighting past this election. We like this at DSA, because one of the things that we think is necessary for a successful political revolution is addressing the silos erected between direct action and electoral folks, between white progressives and African Americans, and white progressives and Mexican Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans — all these racial and ethnic divides evident in this election. We see a path to overcoming them, but it will take a lot more work.

People that are oriented toward winning immediate fights and people that have a long-term vision need to be working together more, and we hope the People's Summit is the first step. We're hoping a lot of folks that have engaged as individuals through groups like The People for Bernie Sanders will find a way to continue being engaged.

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RD: A main tenet of the Radical Democracy project is that we need to widen our involvement beyond simply voting. What are some ways that DSA promotes for the people to be more involved in democratic decision-making?

MS: Our current political system is really not democratic. So many people are prevented from voting, and in gerrymandered districts. From felon disenfranchisement to illegal voter suppression tactics, we need to protect and expand the right to vote. We also need to reform the campaign finance system, which essentially gives people with money completely outsized influence.

We want to see more input into decision-making, in the formal political arena, but also in places like the workplace. We want to see more worker cooperatives, where workers actually own the company.

We want public services run more democratically. Healthcare should not only be universal but provided at the community level, provided in a culturally competent way, and there should be community input into how it's run. Many public services are currently provided imperfectly, from a very centralized system. We would like to see

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them more decentralized, with more community control while still protecting minority rights in the system.

We do think that there could be reforms to the political system, other than just reforming campaign finance. **Most people aren't allowed to participate in decisions that affect them, and they've sort of been trained to think that it's not worth it — they can't make a difference, so they don't bother.** That's problematic.

RD: Given the spotlight the Sanders' campaign has put on democratic socialism, is there an imminent change with the DSA, becoming a third party, for example?

MS: We're definitely growing with the Bernie Sanders phenomenon and the general understanding that Bernie has put forth: this yearning people have for an alternative has a name, and that name is Democratic Socialism. That has been very helpful. Our membership is growing rapidly.

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We have a structure and process that people go through, and practically every week we have a new chapter forming — everywhere from El Paso, Texas, to Cleveland, Ohio, to Oklahoma City. It's a very exciting time for us.

The political system as it is now, with the two major parties, is not ideal. We know from looking at history that there are major structural barriers to the formation of a successful national third party. Any third party would have to very quickly capture momentum and become one of the two major parties. The system is set up to only empower these two parties, and this is very undemocratic, extremely problematic. But it is the reality. So we are not trying to build a third party immediately at the national level —but we do want that, eventually.

Getting back to a long-term vision, we see the only path to getting there is to build a democratic socialist movement at the grassroots. There is no way to build a successful third party without building this infrastructure, and Bernie has done a tremendous service by popularizing the phrase "democratic socialism" and the ideas around it. We're trying to consolidate that, and build a Movement of people that are organized and active in institutions. We support people that are running, both within the Democratic

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Party as progressives and people outside of the Democratic Party, in races where it makes sense. We don't have strict criteria for who we support at the local level — it all depends on the conditions there. Our ultimate goal is to build a Movement that can actually successfully take state power. Control of state power and control of Wall Street are the paths to victory in the United States.

RD: As a feminist, how do you feel about DSA not supporting the female candidate in the Democratic primary — in effect, working against what many would see as an historic victory for women? Was that a tough decision for the organization to make?

MS: For DSA, there was really no need to go over the pluses and minuses in deciding between Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders.

I, personally, am a socialist feminist. We are a socialist feminist organization. And Bernie Sanders's record on that, and many, many other issues was just so much more progressive. I have personally faced backlash from friends who are progressive and supporting Clinton, and do so not just because she's a woman, but because they believe in her policy choices. But she has a record of standing up for wealthy women,

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not standing up for poor women, working class women, women of color, women abroad in the countries where our foreign policy has been undemocratic. If you look at mass incarceration, if you look at welfare reform, if you look at her foreign policy—we couldn't, as socialist feminists, let alone as socialists, support Clinton in the primary, when Bernie Sanders was a viable alternative.

It really speaks to a problem in the discourse today, that people in their heart-of-hearts support her because she's a woman. I do think she has fought for women, in many cases. But, as an organization, we do not support "Lean In" feminism: the idea that all you need to do as a woman is lean in, work harder, demand that your employer treat you more fairly. That is a very individualistic way of approaching feminism because it puts all of the burden on the individual woman that's fighting for these changes, to break through the glass ceiling. It's also problematic, because, how many women are even at the level where they can fight the glass ceiling? That's a very privileged class of women in our society.

We have a perspective on feminism that looks not just at gender, but sexual identity and race and citizenship status and class. And those are all things that affect different women differently, and we need to take them into account.

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RD: It's interesting that at this moment of great movement on the Left, and the huge success of Bernie Sanders, Trump seems to be awakening the worst on the Right.

MS: Donald Trump is creating an organized base for everything we stand against — xenophobia, racism, homophobia, sexism and certainly capitalism. Although he uses rhetoric that appeals to people that are feeling the economic crunch, he is the worst example of an undemocratic, racist ideologue. Our number one priority is contributing to the "dump Trump" Movement. But with an eye to building an explicitly democratic socialist movement in communities across the country, supporting candidates that represent our values, and working on campaigns outside the electoral system, like solidarity with the Verizon strike.

We're also doing a lot of police brutality fight-back and solidarity with Black Lives Matter, and political education. We strongly believe that it is through a combination of looking at history, looking at theory, reflecting on our own experiences, and doing all of that while rooted in real struggles in our communities, that we can become the strongest organizers for change possible. We believe in trying to build that "Movement of Movements" through actual work with ally organizations, and building the kind of movement that can successfully intervene in national-level electoral politics.

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RD: There's a huge surge of movement activity, but systemic problems – racism, economic inequality, a climate disaster we seem to be ignoring – are daunting. Are you hopeful right now?

MS: When I was younger I was a student of history. As a budding activist, I looked at the '60s and at the Suffragettes, and the Labor Movement of the '30s. All these amazing things happened: ordinary people stepped up to the plate and made real change. I wish I had been alive then. And I wondered, would I have done the amazing things these people did?

And now, today, we're in a moment where that question is being asked again. The Wisconsin uprising, Occupy Wall Street, Ferguson – you have all these social movements where people are rising up and asking all of us which side we're on. It's an amazing moment.

On the other hand, it's causing a backlash, and **Trump is the embodiment of a racist, sexist backlash against the gains of social movements in the last few decades, and against the results of the capitalist system evolving in the last few decades.** People are facing economic difficulties they didn't necessarily face in the earlier part of the twentieth century, and are looking for someone to blame, and that's what makes it dangerous.

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MS: But I do have a lot of hope in the humanity of people. I think the smarter we get, as this "Movement of Movements" grows and the more we build ties with each other, the better. In the United States, we need to overcome the color divide that has been constructed for us, in order to win. The more we can do all of that, the more hope I have.

So, yes. **It is a dangerous and precarious time, but I do have hope.**

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